

*John Hanning*

*American Ex-Cowboy*

*The Man Who Got Even with God*





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*By*

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## Part I.

John Green Hanning began life in Kentucky, U.S.A., on January 12, 1849, and ended it fifty-nine years later as Brother Joachim, in the Trappist Monastery, Gethsemane, near his old Kentucky home, on April 80, 1908.

Though it is yet too soon to have an infallible pronouncement that would number him amongst canonized saints, still, I think you will agree that the story of his strange life is well worth telling. You will find the full account in the beautifully written biography published by The Bruce Publishing Co., under the rather challenging title of, *"The Man Who Got Even with God."*

### "I Always Get Even"

Many a youth has attempted to anticipate his entrance into man's estate by surreptitiously smoking his father's tobacco. Well, way back in old Kentucky, about the year 1864, eighteen-year-old John Hanning determined to prove to himself and the world that he was no longer a mere child by burning away, in one night, his father's tobacco, to the tune of several thousand dollars. This is how it happened.

That day, John Hanning, Senior, and John Hanning, Junior, had some hot words. Worse still, they allowed the sun to go down on their anger. Now eighteen-year-old John had already, even at that age, built himself a kind of perverted philosophy of life. The leading principle of that philosophy was summed up in the words he had often used, even in his schoolboy fights. He said, "I always get even." It told its own tale of the inherent vindictiveness of his character.

With the growing darkness of the night, John Junior's mind grew darker until he could see nothing but the blind necessity of getting even with his father.

He did get even.

That very night he set fire, and burned to the ground, the whole harvest of tobacco that was the fruit of a year's toil on his father's plantation. While the flames greedily devoured the dried leaves and the tobacco barns, John Hanning, fleeing from the home of his childhood and from the anger of his father, had become a fugitive on the face of the earth.

## **A Child of Tears**

One can easily imagine the desolation in the old homestead the next morning when the dawn light revealed the full havoc of the fire. Many good neighbors came to express their sorrow and to shake their heads forebodingly at the insane conduct of an ingrate son. This was the very same son who, only a year or so before, had asked and been refused his father's permission to become a monk in the nearby Trappist Monastery.

These were sad days for the good old couple, especially for the boy's mother. After all, he was her boy. She was still his mother. The barn could be rebuilt and a tobacco harvest would grow again next year, but what hope was there for the spiritual renewal of the son who had broken his parents' hearts and brought disgrace on an honored name? Perhaps, too, the thought came that all this had happened because of his father's refusal to allow the boy to follow a vocation in a Trappist Monastery.

If only in these sad hours she, and all the others, was able to draw aside just a little of the veil that hid the future, what a day of joy and triumph would be revealed! In the future, all America, and, for that matter, all the Catholic world, would read with pride and delight the life story of that same renegade, who now fled from the anger of an outraged father and hid from the meek gaze of a broken-hearted mother.

However, there was one star of hope still shining in the inky black sky of his mother's life, and that was her Catholic Faith. It told her of the power of a mother's prayers for a child who erred. It would have reminded her of the words of the great Saint Ambrose to another mother, Saint Monica when he said, "Woman, the child of such tears can never perish." The

child of those tears of the mourning Monica is today that radiant figure in the Church whom we know as Saint Augustine. Mrs. Hanning's Catholic Faith would tell her, too of another Woman, the fairest and purest of all creation, whose Mother's heart was pierced by the seven-pointed sword of sorrow. She knew the other Mother's prayers were still as powerful before the face of God as they were on that far-off day when the same God advanced the hour of wondrous power to please the Mother He loved.

Rock-like, then, in the very center of her heaving heart, there stood the trusting Faith that kept her from being overpowered by this tidal wave of disaster. The tragedy of tragedies in this vale of tears is to have never known, or to have lost, that childlike trusting faith in the power that rules our destiny.

### **A Renegade's Remorse**

There is no need to dwell much on the misery of the unhappy youth facing the void of the world with a still greater void in his heart. Not even the fiendish delight in his vindictive heart could stifle the inevitable remorse that bitingly told him that he was that ugliest of human specimens, a renegade son. And there would have followed him, too, like the eyes of God, the haunting eyes of the mother whom alone, he undoubtedly loved.

His biographer tells us that during the next few months the fugitive lad slept under hedges, in haystacks, and in barns, earning a meal wherever he could. He soon learned the gentle art of begging at back doors and arousing the sympathy of cooks. He stole rides on hay wagons and mule carts. Above all, he walked and walked and walked. John Green Hanning was certainly being humiliated, but he was yet far, very far, from being made humble.

His type of pride actually feeds upon humiliations and his type of heart grows harder and harder with every fresh rebuff, until you get that dangerous and much discussed psychological problem—the anti-social



personality. Antisocial personalities occur when the mind becomes a storehouse of dark and evil thoughts. Then, the well-known criminal type is often evolved, whether anarchist or antiChrist.

At last, John Hanning found his way to the Lone Star State and there, in wild Texas, down by the Rio Grande, for nine long years, John Green Hanning became lost to the world even in name. The rough riders of the prairies ask no man's history. He was simply known as "The Kentuckian" or "Kentucky Jack," or again, "The Quick One," because of the volcanic temper that sent his hand to a trigger or his fist to a man's jaw.

### Down Rio Grande Way

It was a hard life—out in all weather, from blistering sun to biting blizzards. It was often a lonely life—riding at night in the wild under the silent stars. However, it had its compensations. It was carefree.



Paterson, the Australian poet expressed that life lyrically:

*And he sees the vision splendid of sunlight plains extended  
And at night the wondrous glory of the everlasting stars.*

There, near the Rio Grande, one meets nature in the raw, rough characters, who are as true as unpolished diamonds. They sang their lilting love songs to the Mother Nature who cradled them in her chaste bosom, caressed them with her warm sun, refreshed them with the sparkling wine of her morning dew, while she returned their songs from her own choir of a thousand songsters of the bush.

Taken all in all, it was the very best type of life for a youthful prodigal. God alone knows what would have happened had he picked up a job in some big city where the machine would have corroded a bitter heart and



the doubtful entertainments that attract the lone dweller in a big city would have lured him to their iniquitous dens.

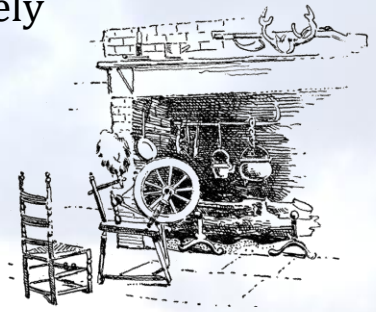
On the prairie, it was all so different. Life was ever fresh and young. So, while he grew into manhood, he never lost that gift which seems to be the natural, and even supernatural, test of greatness of character, namely, the heart of a boy.

It is our everyday experience that there is always hope for the man who has not lost his youth.

Time heals many sorrows and rights many wrongs. One thing it cannot heal—the gnawing hunger of an exiled heart for home and all that it means.

It was only natural, then, that the thoughts of the lonely cowboy should sometimes turn to his old home in Kentucky. Even mere curiosity would make him wonder how were his mum and dad and brothers and sisters. The longing to see the old place and to hear again a mother's gentle voice would break in upon his inmost soul.

So, it was only to be expected that he could stand the nostalgia no longer. Like the prodigal, he would return to his father's home and there beg for his outraged father's forgiveness.



## The Prodigal's Return

It is useless to describe the scene as the tumultuous joyful barking of an old favorite dog brought a wondering little grey-haired old lady to the door. There was the shock of recognition. Time seemed to stand still. It seemed as



though an angel visitant had brought the answer to years of prayer. A joy probably unequalled on earth thrilled that mother's heart. The years rolled back and life was young again, while two hungry hearts devoured a love feast. The father's welcome was, no doubt, quieter, but nonetheless sincere and joyous, for this—a son that was lost was found again.

A little bit of heaven had come to earth these days as brothers and sisters gathered round to hear stories of the wild life down Rio Grande way. Soon the lilt of cowboy songs was heard round the homestead. It was almost too good to be true, too happy to be lasting. Alas! Before that week was out all that note of joy was hushed and silent as if a corpse were brought into a festive hail. This is how it happened.

Sunday morning came, and everybody in that good Catholic home prepared to share in that supreme joy of the faithful Catholic, which is nothing less than taking part in the dread, mighty, holy mystery of faith, that lavish outpouring of divine love which is the Sacrifice of the Mass. Then the bombshell burst to shatter all the joy and peace and delight of their new-found happiness. A man lay dead before their eyes.

John Green Hanning had bluntly announced that he was not going to Mass that day or any other day as long as he lived, for the simple reason that he no longer believed. And, that was that. The corpse at the feast was the soul of their son and brother, dead in sin.

Then, very tenderly, tearfully, came the half-sobbing voice of his mother, sounding strange in the tense silence, "John, dear, won't you please come, just to satisfy me? It's a long time, you know, John, since I had you by my side in public. Please come for my sake."

Even he could not resist that appeal. He went to church, but not to pray. His sin-filled soul sneered at all that wonderful mystery of love that is forever hidden from unbelieving eyes. He did not know that not only the heart-sore mother beside him was praying, but also that the priest at the altar, speaking in the Name of the great High Priest, Jesus Christ, was offering the great sacrifice of Calvary for all sinners, particularly for all there present—including sneering John Green Hanning.



However, he resumed the old life on the farm with that kind of forced gaiety such as one notices in people who have abandoned the faith of their fathers and with it the innocence and love of their happy childhood. We know on the authority of God Himself that some devils are cast out of a man only by prayer and fasting. His faithful mother was doing all that.

It took two major events to hasten the day when stubborn John would kneel humbly at the feet of a priest and pour out the story of his pride and sinfulness in sincere, heartfelt sorrow.

### **Cupid Takes a Hand**

The first big event was the fact that John fell head, neck, and heels in love with a good Catholic girl called Mary. She was the type whose hidden greatness of soul will appear in all its grandeur only in the great day of eternity. She was definitely not one of those anemic Catholic girls who are prepared to barter their faith for passion or auction their shallow love, in marriage, to the highest bidder. No, Mary was the kind whose very breath brings a blessing to any man. So, she told the loved, and very much loving John very plainly and very bluntly, that she was not prepared to marry any man, not even a John Green Hanning, while he was a renegade from his God. Then she proceeded to teach him some home truths, including a refresher course in the principles of the penny Catechism. And she added, just for good measure, that putting in just an appearance at Mass on Sunday morning was not her idea of a

good Catholic. John listened and said, meekly enough, that he understood. So they became engaged, while John tried to come to some sort of terms with his rebellious conscience. He still went to Mass on Sunday, and still sat sullenly beside the patient, silently praying woman with the brave, undaunted smile of the true Christian mother.



## **God's Hour of Mercy**

Then came the other world-shattering event in his life when the patient eyes, the praying lips, and the loving heart of that much-tried mother were stilled forever in death. As John looked his last look on that lifeless form that might have been an angel in repose, his inmost heart thundered to his scoffing mind that only a God of infinite love could create such a masterpiece of human perfection on this cold earth.

At last, there burst forth the torrents of too late regret. It was the old story of which poets have sung, "Loved in life too little, loved in death too well." God's hour had struck. Scoffing John Hanning's pride was overthrown, and his stubbornness was melted in a flood of penitent tears. He had found the bitter sweet of a true sorrow while the angels, as well as his own beloved mother, joyously celebrated one of heaven's special feast days. For we know on the authority of God Himself that there is more joy in heaven upon one sinner doing penance than upon ninety-nine just who need not penance.

## **Love is Repaid by Love**

I told you of John's philosophy of life—always get even. He now made up his mind to get even with God. Love is repaid by love alone, as all the saints tell us. John wanted to repay the love of God and repay it to the very limit. It was just his way of getting even with that wondrous love that is God.

So, one evening, he gently told Mary that for some time he had been thinking of going back to his original vocation and giving his whole life to God as a holocaust of love in the Trappist Monastery called Gethsemani.

Of course, she laughed heartily at the very idea of explosive John in the role of a meek and contemplative monk. Soon she was to realize that he was not speaking in jest. He now asked her to release him from the promise of marriage, while he went to have a try at being a monk. Like the thorough-going Catholic girl that she was, Mary readily gave



permission, though she did add these words of warning, “John, if you fail, never come back to me. I’d never be the wife of an ex-monk. No, John, not even if he were the last man in the world!”

So, to the consternation of the neighborhood, with many shakings of the head and with many prayers and blessings, John entered Gethsemani Monastery in Kentucky.

I doubt if anybody who knew anything about the life of a Trappist monk could ever expect him to remain longer than a few weeks.

It was June 4, 1885; John was then thirty-six years and six months.

## **Part II.**

### **Why the Contemplative Orders?**

It is really surprising what wrong and even foolish ideas some people have about the usefulness of the Contemplative Orders of men and women. Perhaps it will come to them as something of a shock to read these words from no less an authority than Pope Pius XI. Addressing the Carthusians, the Holy Father says, “it is easy to understand how they who assiduously fulfill the duty of prayer and penance contribute much more to the increase of the church and the welfare of mankind than those who labor in the tilling of the Master’s field. For unless the former drew down from heaven a shower of graces, divine graces, to water the field that is being tilled, the evangelical laborers would indeed reap from their toil a more scanty crop.”



In other words, all supernatural fruitfulness depends on prayer and sacrifice. Hence, those who measure a man's worth merely by the amount of external activity he displayed have not the standards of God. They are shocked by the waste of young lives, often with brilliant talents, buried as they say, in a Contemplative Order. They imagine they could do so much good in other active communities, as teachers, nurses, or missionaries. Unfortunately, such people have learned nothing from the Gospel story of the woman who poured out a box of precious ointment on our Lord's feet while the earthly-minded Judas lamented the loss to the poor. They find it easy to understand the charity of the busy Martha, but they cannot grasp the idea of the still greater love of Mary seated beside Him, not even when Jesus assures us that, "Mary hath chosen the better part."

The same lesson of the fruitfulness of the Contemplative Vocation has been brought home to us in our own day by the life story of Saint Therese of Lisieux—The Little Flower of Jesus. It is not without Providential design that she has been given to our restless, turbulent, materialistic age as a model and patroness of toiling missionaries. What was the secret of her life? I think you will find it in the following lines taken from her autobiography:

*"Their loss is gain who all forsake  
To find Thy love O Jesus mine  
For Thee my ointment jar I break  
The fragrance of my life is Thine."*

At a very early age, she deeply understood Saint Paul's teaching on the nature of the Christian Church. She grasped the fundamental fact that the Church is not a mere gathering of individuals professing a common faith and working for a common end. No! It is something far more wonderful than that. It is the Mystic Body of Christ—a living organism made up of the countless millions of baptized souls vitally united with the real physical Christ as its Head—in some such way as the members of the human body—hands, feet, eyes, etc.—are united to form one living organism drawing their power of life and movement from a common source. We know that what affects one member of the human body has



repercussions on the other members. If one member suffers injury, the other members come to its assistance. So, only in a much more wonderful way in the Church, we are members of one living organism bound to the Head—Jesus Christ. With Him and through Him, we share a common life that unites us, even in this world, to the Blessed Trinity Itself.

All this follows from those soul-stirring words of Our Lord in the fifteenth chapter of Saint John's Gospel, where He says, "Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abide in the vine, so neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine; you are the branches; he that abideth in Me, and I in him, the same beareth much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing."

In the same chapter He comforts us with these astounding words that should be deeply engraved on the mind and heart of every Christian:

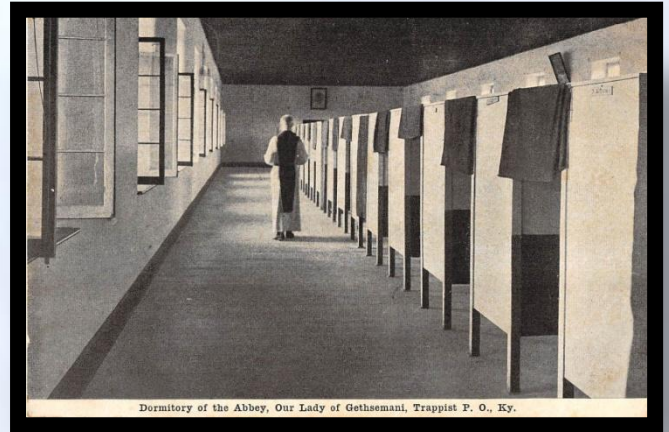
*"If any man love Me, he will keep My word, and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and We will make our abode with him."*

Two very important truths flow from this doctrine. Namely, that our personal lives have a hidden, though very serious, effect on the well-being of the entire mystic Body of Christ. We can hurt our fellow members by our sins and our consequent bad example. On the other hand, ours is the great privilege, given to the very least of us, of being able to contribute in a very wonderful measure to its growth and perfection by our prayers and good works. Moreover, many who are incapable or unwilling to help themselves can, by God's mercy, be helped by other members of the body. Hence, over and above the life of prayer and exterior activity of some orders you have, as Pope Pius XI pointed out to the Carthusians, the very necessary, very fruitful, though very hidden, work of the contemplative orders of men and women.

Of course, we must bear in mind that what is written here applies equally to all individual contemplative men and women in the world. Only the great Day of Judgment will reveal the fruitfulness of those thousands of

hidden souls who, by cooperation with God's Grace, have been enabled to combine a life of wondrous prayer with their duties in the home, in the office, and in the factory.

The religious community into which John Green Hanning now sought admission was a contemplative one. They are known as Trappists and can trace their rule back fifteen hundred years. It is interesting to note its cradle was none other than the famous Monastery of Monte Cassino in Italy, now bombed to ruins by the advance of a "civilization" that is too ignorant and materialistic to appreciate the meaning and necessity of so sacred a shrine.



## **The Lost Battalion**

"Members of the Lost Battalion" is a name given to Trappist monks. They are lost forever to the world and its ways. Of course, the world thinks they are mad. It is a blessed madness, though indeed, as the biographer of John Green Hanning points out, we hear of film stars, financiers, and other successful worldly men going mad, but we do not find madness in a Trappist Monastery. No man who is content can go mad.

John Hanning now lost even his name. Henceforth he is to be known as Brother Mary Joachim. He will discard even his worldly clothes for the rough brown robe of a Trappist lay-brother. This change of name and garment is to symbolize, and be a help to, the far greater change that must go on within his innermost soul if he is to become a monk, a man living alone with the great God, a close follower and intimate personal friend of his Master and Model, Jesus Christ.



## **A Day in a Trappist Monastery**

It was certainly a new and strange world for the ex-fire bug, the ex-rider of the plains, the ex-scoffer at God and at all religious belief.

His day now began at what you might call the ungodly hour of 2 a.m. Holy Mass and prayer occupied him for two hours. To make matters more difficult, he now had to begin the long-drawn-out process of learning the art of praying without the help of a prayer book. In fact, without the use of words. It would take a good deal of the oil of grace before the rusty hinges of his mind would work smoothly and throw open the gates leading to that inner knowledge, that subtle touch of the Holy Spirit, which alone is perfect prayer and is the reward of the faithful, patient, seeking soul.

Indeed his very first lessons in acquiring the art of prayer began by the practice of two simple everyday forms of devotion—The Rosary and the Way of the Cross. The Rosary, often called the Layman's Breviary, taught him the long forgotten story of the life of Christ while it bound him with a golden chain to the Queen of Heaven. Meditation on The Way of the Cross brought home to him the great truths of the enormity of sin, the infinity of God's love for each one of us while it reminded him of the necessity to carry the Cross daily in imitation of Christ.

However, none of that would happen in a day or a week or a year. Actually, it would be the growth of a lifetime. Meanwhile, our Brother had to struggle against wandering thoughts and his own turbulent and untutored nature. Naturally, the habits of a lifetime would break in upon his solitude and he would often find himself wandering in imagination down the Rio Grande, reliving the scenes of cowboy days, and wondering how it fared with all his late companions.

So, it would be something of a relief, at least in the beginning, when, at 4 a.m., it was time to go out to the fields and, with some forty-five other lay-brothers, turn his thoughts to the very elemental work of milking the monastery cows. At five a.m., he found that a cup of coffee and a piece of bread did duty for a breakfast. Then, once more, he was away to the

fields until ten-thirty, when a half-hour's prayer and spiritual reading brought him to eleven o'clock, and to the first full meal of the day—dinner. There was no meat, no eggs, and no fish. There was a large serving of soup, with plenty of bread and vegetables. He was yet to learn that it would be the same menu even on Christmas Day. Midday brought an hour's welcome rest on his plank bed. At 1 p.m., he listened to a lecture or instruction from the Master of Novices. Here, he was initiated to the thousand and one practices and ceremonies of which the outer world knows absolutely nothing, but which help to mould the man into the monk. There were more prayers, and he was off again to the farm until 5 p.m. Supper was served at six, after which came night prayers and repose. Then came the last act of the long day, when white-robed priests and brown-habited brothers filed like so many ghosts along the silent cloisters to the dimly-lit Monastery Choir or Church. There, with bowed head, many of them gray with the years, they burst into a flame of song that was their last tribute to the Queen of Heaven as they chanted the "Salve Regina," Hail Holy Queen. Soon, Brother Joachim's sweet tenor voice was heard above the rest as he came at night to serenade, with chivalrous love, the Lady who had now become the queen of his heart. As the last words echoed into a silence deeper than the tomb, one by one, the ghost-like figures moved along to their poor cells.

It had been a long day, a full day, and, of course, a happy day, of eighteen hours of prayer and work, and so Brother Joachim was glad when he could lay his healthily weary body down to rest and sleep the refreshing, dreamless sleep of the just.

One thing about his long day worth noting is that outside the time of prayer and instruction not once did he hear the sound of a human voice. All his needs were expressed in the sign language, that has been perfected during twelve centuries of Cistercian life. No wonder people had expressed doubts as to the ability of the fiery Kentuckian to stand the pace of the long years ahead. He was to experience no holidays and no pay except that pay which is above all earth's greatest rewards—the



knowledge that one's life is being burned out for the glory of God like a holy candle, lit before a sacred shrine, and, with it, "the peace that surpasseth all understanding."

## **The Habit Does Not Make the Monk**

However, that peace does not come easily, even to those who enter a monastery. Hence, we shall miss the whole beauty and meaning of the hidden years if we do not see behind the exterior life of our monk to the hidden struggle that must take place within the soul of every man who would aspire to the summit of spiritual perfection. It is easy enough to leave the world and put on the habit of a monk. It is quite another matter to leave behind one's self and to rule those treacherous impulses to evil that are in the heart of every one of us.



Besides, after the initial fervor of conversion there comes the inevitable day of trial, when old habits of thought and feeling reassert themselves. Then, to add to the trials, prayer loses its sweetness and becomes dry and difficult. We have the authority of Our Lord in the gospel to warn us that when the evil spirit has been driven out of a man he takes seven other spirits more wicked than himself and returns, so the last state of that man is made worse than the first. Brother Joachim was now made to realize the truth of the old saying, "the habit does not make the monk." To his amazement and dismay he found that he still had the terrible temper that set fire to his father's tobacco barns.

He was to have many a humiliating fall from grace before he could emerge captain of his soul.

For example, one day something or another roused him to fury, and he actually went for a pitchfork with which to avenge some fancied wrong, done by a fellow-novice. The good old Father Abbot, Dom Benedict, was

too skilled a director of souls, and too shrewd a psychologist not to realize that he was dealing with a quiescent volcano, so he tried by every known strategy to break and mould our brother to become a strong man of Christ. He laid penance after penance upon Brother Joachim for every fresh outburst. Every mistake was a golden opportunity to teach humility to this fire-eater. On one occasion when Joachim was sent to help in the kitchen where the meals for guests were prepared, he was told to bake some meat slowly. He did, very slowly. He baked it for four days before he remembered. Of course, he had to acknowledge his fault. Here is how it is described by his biographer.

“What is it?” snapped the Abbot.

“Meat,” snapped back Joachim.

“It doesn’t look like it,” growled the Abbot.

“I burned it,” growled Joachim.

“Eat it,” barked the Abbot.

Joachim was silent. He looked up at the Abbot, then down at the mess that was like greasy charcoal, then up at the Abbot again.

After a moment, he got up from his knees, and, as he was bowing to the Abbot, managed to squeeze out between tightly closed teeth, “Yes, Reverend Father.”

It took him a full six months to eat the mess, but eat it he did, every shred of it. This was expert training surely for a man with a homicidal temper.

## **The Volcano Erupts**

However, one day led to almost complete disaster, and nearly ruined all the good work. That day the good Father Abbot overdid things a bit. It happened that Joachim had not had an outburst for some time and Dom Benedict knew he would be inclined to feel too secure, so he was determined to find something with which to test his patience.



It came along soon enough when Joachim was shaving the Abbot, who had had a stroke. The Abbot was picking at him more than usual, noting this fault and that, and digging up every trifle. He did not notice that Joachim was getting redder and redder and that a dangerous fire was flashing from southern eyes.

At last, the storm broke. Joachim, holding the open razor within an inch of the Abbot's throat, half shouted, "Say one word more and I'll slash you from ear to ear."

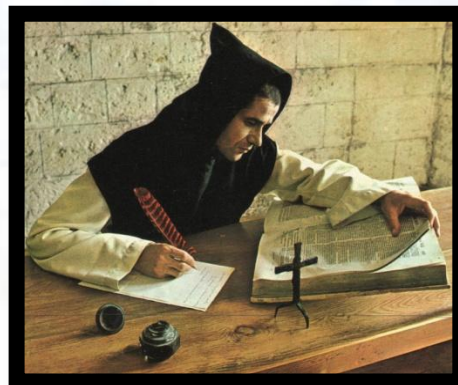
Not one word more did the terrified Father Abbot speak while Joachim stamped out of the room. It might have been the end had Joachim had a less understanding Abbot, and had he not returned within a short time to kneel a very penitent and humbled man to ask forgiveness and a heavy penance. That day, Joachim did not get even.

Very gently, Dom Benedict said, "Brother, for your penance this time you will go to Holy Communion in the morning."

The greatness of soul displayed by the Abbot finished his training in humility.

## Love Purifies

During all his spiritual struggle, two things stood to our trainee monk. The first was a deep conviction that told him he had been a great sinner and that he needed a lot of penance to atone for the past. The other was a growing love for God in the person of Jesus Christ. Long hours of meditation on the sorrows, humiliations, and sufferings of the Son of God kindled a corresponding love in Joachim's own heart, as he realized, what we all too often forget, that Jesus suffered all these things for him.



Then there was the daily union of his soul with the same Jesus in the sacrament of love, the Holy Eucharist. As he went out to the fields he brought in the solitude of his soul the words and example of the Son of God and he soon learned to see in his humble toil of a lay brother the same work that had been transformed into prayer by the touch of the Carpenter of Nazareth. He was being trained to see what we in the world too often forget—each act of the day is, as it were, a sacrament uniting us with Christ. In the neat phrase used by his biographer, Brother Joachim was learning that “the spiritual life is not something, but somebody.”

It is possible for each of us to become genuine contemplatives, if we only realize that no matter what our daily occupation is, no matter how exacting our routine, or how distracting our activity, we still can, with a little extra thought and care, achieve, as John Hanning did, a very delightful intimacy with God in the very midst of our worldly duties.

Cardinal Newman, with characteristic clarity, sums up this question of sanctity in the midst of worldly occupations in these enlightening words, “It is difficult,” he says, “to realize both truths at once and to connect both truths together—steadily to contemplate the life to come yet to act in this. . . . But it is possible to do all things whatever we are about to God’s glory. We may do all things heartily, as to the Lord, and not to man, being both active yet meditative. . . . The true Christian will feel that the true contemplation of that Saviour lies in his worldly business; that as Christ is seen in the poor, and in the persecuted, and in children, so is He seen in the employments he puts upon his chosen whatever they be; that in attending to his own calling he will be meeting Christ; that if he neglect it he will not on that account enjoy His presence at all the more, but while performing it he will see Christ revealed to his soul amid the ordinary actions of the day, as by a sort of Sacrament. Thus, he will take his worldly business as a gift from Him and will love it as such, the highest Christian of all is he whose heart is so set on things above, that things below as little excite, agitate, unsettle, distress, and seduce him as they stop the course of nature, as they stop the sun and moon, or change Summer and Winter.”



## Love Transforms

It was no wonder, then, that his soul deepened and his inmost character underwent a great transformation. With that transformation would grow an ever-deepening peace. His outbursts of temper became fewer and his heavenly consolations became more numerous. The “old man” was fast dying, and the “new man” was being born. The grain of wheat in the ground was corrupting, so the new crop, the wheat of Christ, might be fashioned into a host fit for heaven.

Only God Himself can tell what wonders of grace go on within the sanctuary of a soul when long years of prayer and penance have made pure and perfect the living temple of God. Often such a humble, purified soul is given, while still in this vale of tears, a foretaste of the perfect peace and unalterable joy of the Blessed.

One small incident in Joachim’s closing years gives a glimpse of his hidden relationship with God.

On one of the rare occasions when a visit of a relative was permitted, his two sisters called at the monastery bringing a little baby in arms, who was just then recovering from pneumonia. It happened that while they were walking some distance from the monastery gate, quite suddenly, the hot summer’s day broke into a torrential downpour of rain. Imagine the terror of the sister for her little babe.

Brother Joachim took the little baby, saying, “Don’t worry. Give me the baby and you two run. You are going to get soaked. Lester and I will come after. He will not get wet.”

The sisters ran, but they got well and truly soaked. A few minutes later, to their utter amazement, along sauntered the laughing Joachim in the midst of the terrible downpour, with the baby nestling in his arms, and not a drop of water had fallen on either him or the child. It was too much for the baby’s mother.

“Jack, Jack,” she cried, “he’s dry!”

Her brother's laughing comment was, "You women make me sick. Haven't you got any faith? Of course he's dry. Didn't I tell you he wouldn't get wet?"

His sister was now crying tears of joy for the holiness of her brother, and for the safety of her child. Joachim, teasing, said, "A fine mother you are. I save the child from a downpour and now you drench him with your tears."

So, he laughed off the miracle, as such it undoubtedly was.

Twenty years of such a life seems a long time. However, viewed from the standpoint of eternity, as Joachim was taught to measure things, they seemed a mere nothing. Where men who measure a man's greatness by the gold standard saw just a brown-robed lay brother, the angels of God saw a masterpiece of grace in the making. All he himself knew was an ever-increasing longing to behold forever the God Whose love was daily growing stronger within him. For those who live as he did, death comes in gay attire, holding in her friendly hand an invitation to a banquet that will never end. For those who live as he did, the day of death is the grandest day of all life. Then begins the real life, the life for which man was created and for which he must forever crave.

### **A Solitary Speaks**

Now, perhaps, you would like to pass a few brief minutes in Brother Joachim's company and hear this solitary, so near to God, speak his innermost heart. Here, then, are some gems of thought that enriched his letters to his family.





## **His Views on Religious Life**

To one of his sisters who sought his opinion on a religious vocation, he wrote as follows:

“I always bear you in my heart and in a special manner in my prayers, Holy Communion, and so forth, pleading with our dear Lord to bless you. But I never dreamed of the extraordinary grace that you mention. It would be the greatest blessing, honor and dignity you could receive.

To become spouse of Christ, queen of heaven, and mother of God are dignities beyond expression. And you would become all three: spouse, because betrothed to Him by the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience; Queen of Heaven, because the spouse of the King is Queen; Mother of God, because you cause Him to be born in the hearts and souls of others by your prayers and good works.

If you only knew the great dignity to which Our Lord has called you, you would need no counsel. Experience alone can teach the great peace of soul the religious life gives during life and its assurance of a happy death.

Out of a community of about seventy who were here when I came, there are only three left. I have seen many of them die and all died sweetly. All were aged men. The youngest of the three is about seventy years of age, and is perfectly blind (perhaps you think I am, too, for I am writing in the dark), but he is perfectly happy. He has become familiar with the monastery and can go where he pleases. Besides, in such a large community there is always someone ready to give him special attention. He is cared for like a tender mother would care for her child; for charity, brotherly love, is one of the virtues we hold most dear. He had splendid sight when I came, but he has become blind of late years. He is a priest, and says Mass, daily. I often serve him. I am not allowed to speak to him, but I will have you remembered in his prayers and “mementos.”

I speak of him that you might contrast his life with what it would be in the world, where everyone is seeking pleasure and flying from cares and trouble. As I have said, brotherly and sisterly love is one of the chief

virtues of a religious and to assist one another in bearing his cross is a delight. But how different it is in the world! Besides its many dangers of sin, let one become dependent and life becomes insupportable.”

## **The Value of Suffering**

“Sorrow,” he writes, “is the substance of man a natural life. But, as under every stone there is moisture, so under every sorrow there is joy. Sorrow is but the minister of joy. We dig into the bosom of sorrow and find the gold and precious stones of joy. Sorrow is a consideration of time, but joy is the condition of eternity.

Life is but a dream, eternity an everlasting reality of happiness or suffering. Never be discouraged. Against all your trials, battle bravely for the joys which await you, for you have a place in the Sacred Heart of Jesus and He has prepared a throne for you in heaven, the beauty and splendor of which infinitely surpasses the concept of man. I am so happy that I cannot express my joys.”

## **Thoughts on the Mass**

In another letter, he gives the following very beautiful expression to his thoughts on the Mass. “Tempestuous oceans and towering mountains, murmuring brooks and silent valleys, dark forests and smiling plains, fields of waving corn and blooming meadows, singing birds and roaring lions, the earth clothed in its floral beauty, the cerulean hue and bright sunbeams of the firmament, the flying clouds and the majestic, rolling thunder, the vivid lightning and the mysterious, quiet reflection of the nightly world of stars and beyond the stars—there, the abode of the blessed with their candles of praise, and the angels, those indescribably beautiful exalted spirits, those morning stars and first fruits of creation, those princes of heaven, whose brightness outshines and dims all earthly splendor, as the sun eclipses the stars—and, finally, the Virgin Mother of God, the glorious Queen of Angels and Saints, from whose pure heart

issues, and shall issue forth, the ecstatic, joyous chant of the “MAGNIFICAT,” all these in united praises cannot render to God the glory of one single Mass! Yes, one single Mass procures God more glory and praise than all the worship of all the citizens of heaven and earth can offer Him throughout eternity.”

The man who wrote those words had certainly traveled a long way on the spiritual road from the day when he sneered and scoffed at the same Holy Mass.

### **A Last Letter**

Here is one of his last letters, written on January 18, 1908, just three months before his death.

“My dear Little Sister, I am in possession of your letter of the 8th and feel so thankful to God that you are cheerful and contented. Earth becomes a paradise to one who is perfectly conformed to the holy will of God. Cultivate a great love for this virtue in your heart and you will experience a joy which hitherto you have not known. Everyone has to suffer in this world, but, oh how sweet it is to suffer for One Whom we love.

When once you have tasted the sweetness of this divine love, you cannot afterwards be contented without it. It is the only true happiness that we can have. Others may seem to be happy and joyous, but, if you could read the secret of their hearts, you would judge quite otherwise. Therefore, try to win them to love and serve God, for their trials depress them, and not knowing how to suffer for the One Whom they should love, they are rendered miserable and deserve compassion.

Thus your work will become like that of an angel, or, rather, like that of Jesus Christ Himself. Through the hours of the day, from the pearly dawn until the starry night, and through the quiet watches of the night, in heartfelt prayer I am pleading with sweet Jesus through His Blessed Mother, for my dear brothers and sisters and all their families—all of whom are His treasures and whom He loves with an eternal love—to the



end that we may praise His Holy Name and share His joys in heaven. Continue to frequent Communion; it will be your greatest comfort in life and at the hour of death. Nourish your precious soul with It, for It is infinitely more necessary than is food for the body. Kiss dear Josie and Sim and all their family, and Ella, little Babe, and John for me. I pray for you and all your good intentions. With a heart full of love for each and every one of you. Lovingly, Brother Joachim”

“P.S. I become more and more happy every day. It is my opinion that life will soon end for me in this world.”

The man who wrote that letter had sounded the hidden depths of divine love, and even of human love, too. All his letters breathe the same note of joy and happiness and perfect peace.

His intuition was correct. Death was near. It came, peacefully, after a brief illness, on Thursday, April 30, 1908. Trappists need no coffins. They who live so close to Mother Nature are quite content to have their poor bodies laid on the pure brown earth. So, in the quiet graveyard of Gethsemani Abbey, near his old Kentucky home, the ex-fire bug, the ex-rough rider of the plains, the ex-scoffer of the Mass, awaits the Resurrection.

Meanwhile, a wondering world is fascinated by the story of his life, and many will tell you of the seemingly miraculous answers to the prayers addressed to him in heaven.

**Nihil obstat:**

P. JONES  
Censor Deputatus

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